

A Guide to the Literary Analysis Essay –

INTRODUCTION:

The first paragraph in your essay. It begins creatively with a “hook” in order to catch your reader’s interest, provides essential background about the literary work, and prepares the reader for your major thesis. The introduction must include the *author and title* of the work as well as an explanation of the *thesis* about to be discussed. Other essential background may include *setting, capsule plot summary, an introduction of main characters, and definition of terms*. The *major thesis* goes in this paragraph usually at the end. Because the major thesis sometimes sounds tacked on, make special attempts to link it to the sentence that precedes it by building on a key word or idea.

“Hook” or creative opening: the beginning sentences of the introduction that catch the reader’s interest. Ways of beginning creatively include the following:

1) A startling fact or bit of information

„ **Ex.** Nearly two citizens were arrested as witches during the Salem witch scare of 1692. Eventually nineteen were hanged, and another was pressed to death (Marks 65).

2) A snatch of dialogue between two characters

„ **Ex.** “It is another thing. You [Frederic Henry] cannot know about it unless you have it.”

“ Well,” I said. “If I ever get it I will tell you [priest].” (Hemingway 72).

With these words, the priest in Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms sends the hero, Frederic, in search of the ambiguous “it” in his life.

3) A meaningful quotation (from the work or another source)

„ **Ex.** “To be, or not to be, that is the question” {3.1.57}. This familiar statement expresses the young prince’s moral dilemma in William Shakespeare’s tragedy Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

4) A universal idea.

„ **Ex.** The terrifying scenes a soldier experiences on the front probably follow him throughout his life—if he manages to survive the war.

5) A rich, vivid description of the setting

„ **Ex.** Sleepy Maycomb, like other Southern towns, suffers considerably during the Great Depression. Poverty reaches from the privileged families, like the Finches, to the Negroes and “white trash” Ewells, who live on the outskirts of town. Harper Lee paints a vivid picture of life in this humid Alabama town where tempers and bigotry explode into conflict.

6) An analogy or metaphor

„ **Ex.** Life is like a box of chocolates: we never know what we’re going to get. This element of uncertainty plays a major role in many dramas. For example, in Shakespeare’s play, Romeo and Juliet have no idea what tragedies lie ahead when they fall so passionately and impetuously in love.

Hook Experiment #1:

Hook experiment #2:

Hook experiment #3:

Revised Introduction:

7) MAJOR THESIS: a statement/claim that provides the subject and overall argument of your essay.

„ **Ex.** Through Paul’s experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches, Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.

Sometimes a thesis becomes too cumbersome to fit into one sentence. In such cases, you may express the major thesis as two sentences.

„ **Ex.** In a Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens shows the process by which a wasted life can be redeemed. Sidney Carton, through his love for Lucie Manette, is transformed from a hopeless, bitter man into a hero whose life and death have meaning.

TOPIC SENTENCE/SUPPORT THESIS: the first sentence of a body or support paragraph. It identifies one aspect of the major thesis and states a primary reason why the major thesis is true.

example: When he first appears in the novel, Sidney Carton is a loveless outcast who seems little worth in himself or in others.

BODY: the support paragraphs of your essay. These paragraphs contain supporting examples (concrete detail) and analysis/explanation (commentary) for your topic sentences/support theses. Each paragraph in the body includes (1) a topic sentence/support thesis, (2) integrated concrete detail and commentary, and (3) a concluding sentence. In its simplest form, each body paragraph is organized as follows:

1. topic sentence / support thesis
2. lead-in to concrete detail
3. concrete detail
4. commentary
5. transition and lead-in to next concrete detail
6. concrete detail
7. commentary
8. concluding or clincher sentence

CONCRETE DETAIL: a specific example from the work used to provide evidence for your topic sentence/support thesis. Concrete detail can be a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation from the work.

example: When Carlton and Darnay first meet at the tavern, Carlton tells him, "I care for no man on this earth, and no man cares for me" (Dickens 105).

COMMENTARY: your explanation and interpretation of the concrete detail. Commentary tells the reader what the author of the text means or how the concrete detail proves the topic sentence/support thesis. Commentary may include interpretation, analysis, argument, insight, and/or reflection. (*Helpful hint: In your body paragraph, you should have twice as much commentary as concrete detail. In other words, for every sentence of concrete detail, you should have at least two sentences of commentary.*)

example: Carton makes this statement as if he were excusing his rude behavior to Darnay. Carton, however, is only pretending to be polite, perhaps to amuse himself. With this seemingly off-the-cuff remark, Carton reveals a deeper cynicism and his emotional isolation.

TRANSITIONS: words or phrases that connect or "hook" one idea to the next, both between and within paragraphs. Transition devices include using connecting words as well as repeating key words or using synonyms.

example: Another example... Finally, in the climax...

Later in the story... In contrast to this behavior...
Not only...but also... Furthermore...

LEAD-IN: phrase or sentence that prepares the reader for a concrete detail by introducing the speaker, setting, and/or situation.

., **Ex.** Later, however, when the confident Sidney Carton returns alone to his home, his alienation and unhappiness become apparent: "Climbing into a high chamber in a well of houses, he threw himself down in his clothes on a neglected bed, and its pillow was wet with wasted tears" (Dickens 211).

CLINCHER/CONCLUDING SENTENCE: last sentence of the body paragraph. It concludes the paragraph by tying the concrete details and commentary back to the major thesis.

., **Ex.** Thus, before Carton experiences love, he is able to convince himself that the world has no meaning.

CONCLUSION: last paragraph in your essay. This paragraph should begin by echoing your major thesis without repeating the words verbatim. Then, the conclusion should broaden from the thesis statements to answer the “so what?” question your reader may have after reading your essay. The conclusion should do one or more of the following:

- 1) Reflect on how your essay topic relates to the book as a whole
- 2) Evaluate how successful the author is in achieving his or her goal or message
- 3) Give a personal statement about the topic
- 4) Make predictions
- 5) Connect back to your creative opening
- 6) Give your opinion of the novel’s value or significance

General Style Tips (for formal analysis)

1. Avoid using personal pronouns (I, you, we, us)
2. Avoid conversational tone
3. Use transition when you go from one idea to another to alert the reader
4. Vary sentence length and structure.